

# NEVADA Silver & Blue

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Alumna of the Year  
**Frankie Sue Del Papa**







# 'WHAT YOU SEE IS WHO I AM'

**T**he 2002 Alumna of the Year, Frankie Sue Del Papa, needs little introduction. She is a familiar face not just to Nevada alumni, but to a large portion of the state.

From her days as ASUN president (1970-71) and university system regent (1980-86), to her current position as the state's attorney general, Del Papa has ascended the political ladder and, along the way, advanced the cause of women in the state. She was the first woman in Nevada to be elected secretary of state and the first to become attorney general. It's not easy to be a groundbreaker and Del Papa, by her example, has established a road for other women to travel that's a great deal more accessible.

In a state that leans conservative Republican, Del Papa has been a proud Democrat. She continues to be an enthusiastic and active advocate for causes such as domestic violence prevention and teen pregnancy prevention, as well as education, the arts and the environment. As secretary of state, she spearheaded election reform and anti-fraud securities legislation. As attorney general, she has made fraud prevention and consumer protection priority issues. In short, she is a woman who cares deeply about ordinary people and who has worked tirelessly on their behalf.

Now, having made the decision not to run for a fourth term as attorney general, Del Papa says she will be taking a little time before deciding where next to devote her energies. Still in her prime, Del Papa will certainly have for herself that which she would like to see for all women — choices, options and opportunities. If history provides a precedent, she will continue to use her talents in the cause of making life better for others.

From her time on campus as ASUN president to today, as one of the most influential female politicians in the state's history, Frankie Sue Del Papa has always done things her way

**By John Wheeler**

**Photographs By Jean Dixon**

**F**rankie Sue Del Papa opens the front door of her house, perched on a leafy hill between Virginia and Sierra Streets, just a stone's throw from her alma mater. "Sebastian," she calls out, scanning the street. "Sebastian!" she cries, her intonation rising slightly. On this occasion, Sebastian — a neighborhood cat — doesn't respond. It's a hot summer's day and he's probably ensconced under a bush somewhere. However, he knows there's always a bag of food with his name on it inside the door of the Del Papa residence, courtesy of the state's attorney general — a woman who happens to suffer from cat allergies.

It's typical Del Papa, says friend Michele Basta, director of public relations and development for the university's libraries.





**Del Papa, preparing for her Sunday morning walk, gets a friendly greeting from neighborhood cat, Sebastian.**

"She's a natural nurturer," Basta says.

For Del Papa, her home is clearly her castle. Dressed in T-shirt and sweat pants, she's been pulling weeds in her back garden, which affords sweeping views of Mount Rose and the Truckee Meadows. It's a modest, not overly large, brick house that she shrewdly bought back in 1979 and remodeled in 1993. Later, she carries on chatting while washing dishes and wiping down the kitchen table. As attorney general, she oversees 340 people, including about 140 attorneys, but at home she oversees no one.

"No, I don't have a housekeeper," she says, clattering plates into the sink. "I would never have more house than I could take care of myself. I don't know why people would want these big, big homes. You've got to heat them and you've got to clean them."

That same self-reliant, unpretentious streak rolls over to her professional life. She drives herself in her red Jeep Cherokee back and forth between her home and her office in Carson City and to the hundreds of public engagements she attends annually.

"What you see is who I am," she says matter-of-factly.

Del Papa has been Nevada's attorney general for the past 12 years but is not running for a fourth term. When she relinquishes office at the end of the year, she plans to take "a sort of self-imposed sabbatical." She's first going to take a Spanish immersion class in Mexico and has already bought her ticket for a trip to



Australia and New Zealand. She expects to take about six months to relax, explore and contemplate her future.

Whatever she does and wherever she goes, it will be uncharted territory for Del Papa. "I've never not worked since I was 15-and-a-half years old," she says.

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

That she is blessed with one of the most memorable political names in the state is a matter of record. However, Del Papa, the daughter of an immigrant Italian whose family ran a grocery store in Tonopah, Nev., discovered its value serendipitously while a student at Nevada.

"I never went by the name Frankie until I came to the university," she recalls. "My parents, my entire life, called me Susie. It's just that when I came to the university everything is computerized and uses your real name. In fact, I didn't even know my name was Frankie Sue until the second grade, when a teacher saw it on some record."

Her father, Frank, had wanted a boy. "So I ended up getting this very unusual name," she says. "My mother was from the South, so I got the double name, Frankie Sue. It was kind of lyrical. In the end, it turned out to be a great political name."

### I ABOUT DIED!

Del Papa genuinely likes people and enjoys socializing. "I get out in a crowd and it's easy for me to say hello, talk to people," she says. "The hard part sometimes is for your friends and family to accept how much time this takes."

When she's not working, Del Papa gravitates toward more contemplative activities.

"I think there's an introvert side to me," she acknowledges. "A side that loves to read or go to a movie...or paint. It's almost meditative when you paint."

She took up the hobby three years ago after working through the exercises in Julia Cameron's book *The*



A young Del Papa poses with a favorite doll.

(Below) 1969 Sagebrush picture of Del Papa, candidate for Military Ball Queen.

### Artist's Way.

There's also a humorous side to Del Papa that isn't always apparent. "My campaign manager says I should always lighten up because I tend to be very serious," she says.

Fortunately, she's

comfortable laughing at herself and not shy about revealing an embarrassing moment.

"(In July), I was in Pennsylvania in a conference room and it was freezing," she says. "It was very formal and they were filming a speech. So I marched over to what I thought was the thermostat and I..." She bursts out laughing recalling the incident. "...pushed this thing and down comes this screen in front of the speaker they're filming. I about died!"

She hears some pretty funny things others say, too. And they're meant to be compliments.

"People will wait in line to tell you that, 'You look young from a distance,'" she says with a laugh. Another line she recalls hearing: "You're so heavy that your face doesn't show any wrinkles."

"The wonderful, very human things people say or do," she says warmly.



### NATIVE NEVADAN

Del Papa was raised in Tonopah, but was born in Hawthorne, Nev. "because my mother didn't trust the doctor in Tonopah." The family moved to Las Vegas when Del Papa was 13.

Although she had two older half-sisters — her mother's children from a previous marriage — Del Papa was essentially raised as an only child. "My mother referred to me as her fall crop," she says.

"Only children are often given a lot of attention and, because of all this attention, they are constantly striving," she says. "I was expected to be a good student, so I was a good student. But I was given tremendous freedom. The forbidden fruit didn't have any allure for me because of



## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1991-2002 Nevada Attorney General  
 1987-1991 Nevada Secretary of State  
 1984-1987 Private law practice in Reno  
 1980-1986 University of Nevada System Board of Regents  
 1979-1984 Partner, Law Offices of Thornton and Del Papa, Reno  
 1978-1979 Legislative assistant to U.S. Sen. Howard Cannon, Washington, D.C.  
 1975-1978 Associate, Law Office of Leslie B. Gray, Reno  
 1974-1975 Law clerk for U.S. District Judge Bruce Thompson, Reno  
 1971-1974 Staff assistant to U.S. Sen. Alan Bible, Washington, D.C.

## EDUCATION

1987 John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Program for Senior Executives in State and Local Government  
 1974 J.D. National Law Center, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.  
 1971 B.A. University of Nevada, Reno, political science and pre-law (with distinction). Student body president 1970-71  
 1967 Rancho High School, North Las Vegas

## AWARDS AND HONORS

Among the dozens of awards:  
 "Woman of Achievement Award" and Hall of Fame inductee — Nevada Women's Fund  
 "Politician of the Year" — Truckee Meadows Human Services Association  
 "Woman of Distinction Award" — Soroptimist International of the Americas Sierra Nevada Region  
 "Humanitarian of the Year" — National Conference on Christians and Jews  
 "Woman of the Year" — YWCA  
 "Outstanding Woman Lawyer" — Northern Nevada Women Lawyers Association



Del Papa and artist Nancy Peppin enjoy a leisurely read of the Sunday papers over coffee at Deux Gros Nez, near downtown Reno.

the way my parents handled things."

Her Kentucky born mother, Golda, had been a truck driver during World War II and "had tremendous common sense," Del Papa says. "Her favorite expression was, 'If everyone put their problems on the table, you would walk away with your own before you walked away with somebody else's'"

Del Papa admits that, although they are now both deceased, her parents' approach to life still influences her greatly.

"My mom lived through the Depression, so I know that I've got Depression-era values," she says. "Your own attitude is so important. I grew up in a two-bedroom, one-bath cinder block home in North Las Vegas. But my mother said, 'Aren't we lucky? My house is paid for and I have money in the bank.' I know very wealthy people who have an attitude that they don't have anything."

## FIRST TASTE OF POLITICS

It was in junior high when Del Papa first got bitten by the politics bug, becoming involved in student government. A counselor who took a special interest and observed her skills suggested she take political science/pre-law when she went to college.

"She said, 'You know, you really should think about being a lawyer.' So, that's what I did," Del Papa says.

She recalls her first months on the Nevada campus:

"I was very active. I majored in political science but I also majored in extracurricular activities. You name it, I did it."

While a student, she lived in a dorm and worked in food service. It hadn't been her first choice. As a book lover, she'd really wanted to work in the library.



## 'I'm looking forward to reflection,' she says. 'It will be interesting to see what the next phase of my life brings.'

"I so fell in love with the people there at the dining commons," Del Papa says. "One lady, when I interned at the legislature, took her day off during the week and would take me down to Carson City and then she'd bring me home. Her name was Margaret Todd. I ended up working at the dining commons all three years because I liked the people so much."

When she ran for ASUN president, the exposure from being a food server probably made the difference in her successful campaign.

"It actually turned out to be a great job in terms of a future election because you got to see everybody and meet everybody," she says.

In one of life's ironies, the Culinary Union has not supported Del Papa since a legal wrangle over the

union's ability to picket in front of Las Vegas casinos some years ago, and was able to block labor's endorsement of Del Papa in her last election.

"Basically, labor thought that I should have done what they wanted as opposed to what the law required," Del Papa says.

The Culinary Union rejected a candidate who'd spent three years as a food server.

"It didn't stop me getting re-elected," Del Papa says with a shrug.

### CAMPUS TO CAPITOL

The young Del Papa fell in love with the Nevada campus and, to this day, seems to have not lost any of her youthful enthusiasm for the institution.



A varied collection of art graces Del Papa's home, along with piles of books waiting to be read.



## Del Papa quick takes on...

### CAMPAIGN FINANCE

"We are a nation whose leaders are forced to spend most of their time campaigning and fund-raising rather than governing. You end up with not many people representing the little guy because they're spending all their time having to deal with special interests."

### ARGUING BEFORE THE U.S. SUPREME COURT

"Incredible. When you're there arguing, you're the only person. You don't sense anything else around you, you're so focused. I loved it."

### THE SENATE

"When I was younger, the job I aspired to would have been U.S. Senator. Now, with the realities of what it takes to raise money for such a race, I'm less inclined to think that is the end of the golden ring that I once thought it was."

### PERSONAL POLITICS

"I'm a moderate. Fiscally conservative, but socially progressive. That's probably the best way to describe me."

### REPUBLICANS

"I love it when they vote for me (laughs). I love the fact that in Nevada, people will most often vote for the person rather than the politics."

### BILL CLINTON

"I met him several times. Highly intelligent. Fascinating. An incredible dinner conversationalist."



Del Papa collects matryoshka — stackable dolls that fit inside one another — from around the world.

"When I walk that campus, it's like I've come home," she says. "I have a really strong feeling for that place and the memories there."

After graduating in 1971, Del Papa obtained her law degree from The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. and spent the rest of the decade practicing law in Nevada and Washington, D.C. In 1980, she won her first elective office — university system regent — a position she held until becoming secretary of state in 1987.

"Having served as a regent, I knew I really wanted to be involved in politics," she says.

After four years as secretary of state, she successfully ran for attorney general in 1991, twice winning re-election to the four-year post. Back in 1971, Del Papa told the Sagebrush: "The office is my whole life right now," referring to the student body presidency. Thirty years on, that comment still rings true.

"I do spend a lot of time working," she says. "This is a very difficult job and it's demanding in terms of travel. A lot of evenings and a lot of weekends. I love what I do. I'm not leaving because I dislike the job. It's just...I've done it a long time and...the lack of flexibility...the legislature. You're in a micro-management situation where it's more and more difficult to do your job, and there are lots of other things I want to do."

### NOTHING CAN HURT YOU...

Del Papa speaks like Brazilians play soccer, lulling you with thoughtful, fragmented sentences and moments of silence before injecting a sudden burst of pace that leaves you in her wake. When she hits a comfort zone issue, such as women's rights, the words come out in a blur.

"Feminism has gotten a bad rap because, to me, feminism implies choices, options and opportunities," she says. "I think everyone should be a feminist because everyone should hope that women have choices, options





Del Papa finds tranquility in her basement studio, where she paints landscapes.

and opportunities."

One of the characteristics of Del Papa's speech is a tendency to color her conversation with Zen-like aphorisms — phrases that hint at the philosophical and spiritual side of her nature. One of her favorite sayings is: nothing can hurt you unless you let it hurt you.

"They say humans have this capacity to forget what hurts them, forget the pain of things," she says. "I've always had that capacity. There's no point in dwelling on painful things. I wish I had learned that earlier. The hardest part in life is when a relationship comes to an end. That's one of the hardest things to face."

Del Papa was married for six years to former state consumer advocate Jon Wellinghoff. They divorced in 1982. She also had a long relationship with another lawyer, which ended several years ago. She admits the breakups were difficult, but speaks warmly of her marriage.

"I have nothing but fond memories of the time we spent together," she says. "We had a great life, we took some great trips. Marriage is an interesting thing. What you want, of course, is the partnership and the companionship. The older you get, the more difficult it is to find that because everyone is married so there are not many opportunities to find relationships because people are already in them."



## NEVER SAY NEVER

Del Papa seems genuinely excited about the opportunity to step back and figure out what she wants to do with the rest of her life. "I'm looking forward to reflection," she says. "It will be interesting to see what the next phase of my life brings."

It's hard to imagine her out of politics, though, especially watching the ease with which she rubs shoulders with the movers and shakers of the state. One comment suggests that the future may yet see her back in the political fray.

"I'm not going anywhere," she says, describing life after her sabbatical. "I'm not leaving this place. I'm just not going to be in elective office for a while."

As Del Papa is fond of saying: "Never say never."